

# Wellness Notes

## Tension Headache\*

Tension headache is the most common type of headache, affecting more than three in four people at some point in their lives. This type of headache usually develops in the afternoon. The pain is mild or moderate. It may envelop your entire head or be limited to the forehead or to the back or top of your head. Many people describe the sensation as a dull tightness or pressure that occurs in a bandlike pattern. The intensity of the pain may fluctuate, but it won't be intense enough to keep you from sleeping or to awaken you.

Unlike migraine headaches, tension headaches are rarely accompanied by other symptoms, such as nausea, vomiting, or blurred vision. In addition, researchers haven't linked them to common migraine triggers, such as foods, genes, or hormonal changes. Tension headaches can occur infrequently, regularly, or daily (see "Chronic daily headache"). They are common at any age, but women are more susceptible to them than men are.

### Triggers and Aggravators

Experts believe that the pain of a tension headache is caused by tightness in the muscles of the scalp and the back of the neck. A variety of emotional and physical factors can trigger this muscle tightness.

A survey published in the journal *Headache* reported that stress was the most common factor precipitating tension headache. Other frequent triggers included (in order of their prevalence) missed meals, lack of sleep, and fatigue. Physical problems, such as eyestrain, whiplash, or poor posture, can also act as triggers.

Subjecting your head and neck muscles to any prolonged strain can cause them to stiffen, leading to tension headache. Maintaining good posture and avoiding repetitive motions can help avoid such problems. The following suggestions may also reduce muscle tension:

- Don't rest your chin on your chest while reading.
- Avoid cupping the telephone between your shoulder and ear.
- Keep your computer monitor at eye level or above to avoid neck strain.
- Avoid excessive gum-chewing, which can tighten jaw muscles.
- Try not to clench your jaw or grind your teeth.

How these factors cause the muscle tightness that leads to a headache is unknown. Not surprisingly, researchers have found that these triggers also aggravate tension headaches already in progress. Overall, the results confirm the advice doctors often give to people with tension headaches:

- Don't skip meals.
- Get enough sleep.
- Pace yourself to avoid excessive fatigue.

The above is for informational purposes only and is not intended to provide or be a substitute for professional medical advice, diagnosis or treatment.

